

The Exegesis Paper

The goal of an exegesis paper is to determine the meaning of a Biblical passage. To exegete is literally to “lead out” meaning from a text. It is related to the debated topics of hermeneutics or Biblical interpretation, and Biblical research, which has numerous subfields of specialization in modern research. Interpretation is necessary because words have very different meanings in different contexts. Consider the term “football coach”: is it someone who teaches a team to score and prevent touchdowns, or is it a bus carrying soccer fans? It depends on the context, whether Great Britain or the United States. Likewise, Biblical interpretation and exegesis seeks to determining the meaning of the Bible in its original context, and then to apply it to the modern reader, hearer, and believer.

At the beginning, a unit of thought, such as a paragraph, should be determined. Is there a definite beginning and ending in my unit of thought? This unit of thought is often called a *pericope**.

Guidelines for Exegesis

The following are helpful books:

Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Louisville: Westminster, 2002)

William Klein, Craig Blomberg and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

Vern S. Poythress, *God Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999).

Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016).

Steps in Exegesis

I. Spiritual Preparation

A. The new birth.

Since the Bible is the Word of God, spiritual regeneration or being born again (John 3:3) is a primary necessity. The person must have spiritual life from God within to be able to hear from God. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says that the natural person, that is the one who has not experienced the new birth, cannot receive the teachings of the Holy Spirit.

B. Walking in the Holy Spirit

Romans 8:1-9 speaks about walking in the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit guided the Biblical writers, the believer must be following the Spirit in his or her life to be able to hear from the Spirit.

C. Prayer

The Bible must be approached by prayer, asking God to help us understand the meaning of the book we have been given. In John 16:13, we are told that the Spirit will guide believers into all truth. We must ask for God’s illumination in prayer.

D. Proper Doctrine of the Word of God

The believer must have a proper doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible as the Word of God. J. I. Packer, in the classic work, *God Has Spoken*, points to the words about inspiration in II Timothy 3:16, to Jesus own teaching on the authority of the Bible, especially in Matthew 5:17-20, and the way in which the apostles note that where scripture speaks, God speaks (for example, Acts 1:16 and 4:25). We turn to the Bible to hear from God, for in it, God has spoken.

II. Observation

The next stage is to patiently listen to and read the passage itself. What does it actually say? We make notes, ponder, ask questions, and meditate on what the passage under examination actually says. We make sure we have read the whole book in which our passage is located. It is important at this point to compare various English translations.

III. Interpretation

A. Social context

What did the people first hearing the passage assume? How did they live? How were their families and villages structured? A key resource here is *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, available in the library. Also very valuable here is *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, which is available for both the Old and New Testaments, Craig Keener having written the New Testament edition, and John Walton et. al. having written the Old Testament edition. One can look up any passage in the Bible in this very valuable resource.

B. Literary context

Where does the passage occur in the book? How is it related to the rest of the chapter and the rest of the book in which it is included? What comes before and after it?

C. Language

Is there a special meaning to the original Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic? Compare various translations at this point. Is there a particular word which may have a special meaning?

D. Genre

Am I reading a psalm; proverb; letter; law? What type of literature am I reading?

E. Text Criticism

Is there a debate in the manuscript tradition about this passage? Footnotes in study Bibles and better commentaries, such as the Word Biblical Commentary, will pick this up.

F. Canonical Context

How does that passage relate to the rest of the corpus in which it is contained (such as the letters of Paul; the gospels; the Law of Moses). For example, if looking at the term “righteousness of God” in the letter to the Romans, one might see from a concordance (*Bible Gateway, available on-line*) where else the term is used in other letters of Paul. If trying to determine the meaning of “righteousness” in Matthew 5:20, one should look for other places where that word is used in the rest of the gospel of Matthew and then the other gospels. Remember that the best interpretation of the Bible is in the Bible itself. How does the passage correlate with other passages?

G. History of Redemption

How does this passage relate to the rest of the Bible? Is it part of the story of Israel prior to the coming of Christ? Does it occur after the resurrection of Christ and giving of the Holy Spirit? Is it a result of the fall, or part of the fulfillment of the Christ-event?

H. Check with commentaries

As a check on what has been done already, check good commentaries such as the Word Biblical Commentary Series, the Pillar NT commentaries, the New International Commentary series, or the Anchor Bible series.

IV. Application

A. Summary

Here, summarize in one concise statement or sentence what the passage is teaching.

B. Believers/Unbelievers

How would this passage relate to a new Christian? A mature believer? Is it a promise, a command, or a word of encouragement? What would this passage say to someone who does not yet know Christ? Most of all, here the question is asked: what is God saying to me in this passage?

C. Preparation to preach or teach

Take the summary statement and develop from it an outline with major points. Correlate with other passages from scripture. Develop illustrations. Create an introduction and conclusion.

* **Pericope** – A technical term for a short section or literary unit that has integrity even when “cut off” or “cut out” (Gk *perikoptō*) from a longer narrative. Frequently a pericope will be the focus of exegesis...

Arthur G. Patzia and **Anthony J. Petrotta**, *Pocket Dictionary of Biblical Studies* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2002).